

Why “I Make Rooms for Ghosts”?

Jean-Marie Reynier, 4 August 2026

I was fifteen when I read Frances A. Yates's *L'arte della memoria* in Italian. That book transformed me. I discovered that memory could be constructed as an architecture, traversed as a place and inhabited by images. This conception has shaped the way I think about photography ever since. *Thinking Fear* is the broad family to which all my work belongs and the architecture that holds it together. All my series find their place within it, like rooms inside a single palace. The fear that runs through them is the fear of erasure: the disappearance of beings, the loss of places, the erosion of memory, the forgetting of family narratives and the burial of singular histories beneath the course of History.

What we now call a memory palace belongs to the ancient *ars memoriae*, known chiefly through the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero and Quintilian. The method relied on the association of places, the *loci*, with images, the *imagines*. The orator would picture a real or imaginary dwelling. He would mentally establish its vestibule, halls, passages and rooms, then place within each location an image corresponding to a part of his speech. When the time came to speak, he would move through this inner architecture. The places preserved the order of his thoughts and the images restored their content. Cicero compares the places to wax tablets and the images to the letters inscribed upon them. The places thus become the support for a form of writing composed of images. The author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* recommends creating *imagines agentes*, active images that are singular and emotionally charged, capable of imprinting themselves deeply upon memory. This is where *Thinking Fear* directly encounters the ancient art of memory. Fear possesses this power of inscription. Certain images remain within us because they have reached a profound region of our consciousness. In my work, skulls, houses, bodies, landscapes and objects act as active images. They condense an awareness of death, attachment, refuge, threat, disappearance and the desire to preserve. Their meanings remain fluid. Each symbol opens onto several narratives and allows distant experiences to meet within a single image. Symbols also unsettle us through their autonomy. They survive those who created them and continue to act after their history has been lost.

The vocabulary changes with the philosophical tradition. Latin rhetorical texts speak of *imagines* and *simulacra*. With Aristotle, and later in medieval thought, the mental image becomes a *phantasma*, with the plural *phantasmata*. The term describes the form that a perceived thing retains within the imagination and through which it remains present to thought. Thomas Aquinas states that human intelligence thinks by turning towards the *phantasmata*. This linguistic genealogy directly concerns the title of my work. The French word *fantôme*, at the heart of the original title, descends from the Latin *phantasma*, itself derived from the Greek *phántasma*, meaning image, apparition, vision or spectre. Within this continuity, the images placed in the rooms of memory can be understood as *phantasmata*, mental apparitions that make present what has moved away, what has disappeared or what remains inaccessible.

The founding story of the art of memory deepens this relationship. Cicero and Quintilian attribute its invention to the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos. Simonides had composed a victory ode for Scopas in which he also celebrated Castor and Pollux. Angered by this tribute, Scopas paid him only half the promised sum and told him to claim the rest from the two gods. During the banquet, a servant informed Simonides that two young men were waiting for him outside. He went out and found no one. Behind him, the hall collapsed and buried the guests. The mysterious visitors were then recognised as Castor and Pollux, who had settled their debt by saving his life. The bodies had become unrecognisable, yet Simonides was able to restore each dead person's identity by remembering the place each had occupied around the table. In its origin story, the art of memory is thus born from a catastrophe, a destroyed

architecture and the need to restore identities to the dead. Memory mentally reconstructs the vanished space so that each absent person may recover a place. It brings back into History the names, bodies and lives that destruction had rendered illegible.

The room also belongs to the material history of photography. The Latin word *camera* means a vaulted room. The *camera obscura*, the dark chamber, lies at the origin of the photographic apparatus. A photograph is literally born inside a chamber where light forms an image. The word also resonates with Roland Barthes's French title *La Chambre claire*, published in English as *Camera Lucida*, and with his "that has been", the certainty that whatever appears in a photograph once stood before the lens. Every photograph preserves the trace of a presence that time transforms into absence. A ghost is a presence deprived of its present, a form that returns without fully recovering its context. Its appearance unsettles the boundary between what remains and what has disappeared. The fear of ghosts thus joins the fear of losing the memory that would allow us to recognise them, name them and understand what they have returned to remind us of.

Thinking Fear means giving this anxiety a form, an architecture and a language. Photography allows me to bring order to what threatens to disperse. Each image becomes a *locus* in which to place a face, a body, a house, a fear or an attachment. Each series opens a new room. Each room gives absence an address and preserves the possibility of its return.

To approach these palaces is to attempt to defeat History at the scale of a fragment. It is to preserve a place for what was seen, loved, inhabited or feared. *Thinking Fear* is the name of this palace. *I Make Rooms for Ghosts* names the gesture.

To photograph, for me, is to bring order among the ghosts.

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Main references: Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Italian translation by Albano Biondi as *L'arte della memoria*, Einaudi; *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Book III; Cicero, *De Oratore*, Book II; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book XI; Aristotle, *On the Soul* and *On Memory and Recollection*; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, First Part, Question 84, Article 7; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*.